

WHICH IS THE WORST?

By Rev. James B. Converse.

The word "Church" has various meanings. From two of these spring two heresies which bear evil fruit. Which bears the worst it is hard to say.

Sometimes the word Church means Christians, all who profess the true religion and their children. Sometimes it means the organization of such people for worship. What is true of the Church in one sense is very easily and imperceptibly transferred to the Church in the other sense.

Thus, for example, it is the duty of the Church to lead in all the great movements that make for righteousness. As a matter of fact, all such movements have sprung from the Church, that is, from Christian influences. Take the Turkish revolution as an example. Turkey is a Moslem country. The majority of its people are Mohammedans. But if we could dig up the roots of the young Turkish movement and examine them we would find in them the missionaries who have for eighty years been preaching and teaching in all parts of the empire, and the intercourse with western Europe and America. But because the Church thus does and should lead reform some assert that the Church in the second sense should lead the great movements that will make the world better. Because as Christians we should purify politics, they hold that we should do it as ecclesiastics, through ecclesiastical methods.

This is the old popish error that has done so much harm in the world, the union of Church and State, that we have cast out as evil, and only evil.

The Church in its second sense cannot lead reforms, from its very nature. Harmony is essential to worship; controversy is the life-breath of reform. So Christ sends not peace, but a sword into the world. When, therefore, the organization for worship enters the political sphere it becomes the defender of all that exists, both good and bad. It cannot engage in controversy without committing suicide; and, therefore, if it is a political leader it necessarily defends the evils that can only be removed by controversy. The reigns of the popes were the dark ages of Europe.

Another result also follows. The political reforms that the Church does not endorse, and from its very nature cannot endorse, are regarded as non-moral. Thus today in our own land some questions are regarded as moral questions on which in some pulpits the minister feels free to speak, and other questions are thought of as simply political, about which he should be silent. In the first class are prohibition, divorce and Sabbath observance; and in the second, tariff, taxation, child labor, the referendum, etc. This distinction between moral and non-moral questions is the root of our graft in politics, business, legislation. The Church has been teaching America that a part, and the larger part, of our lives, of our actions and our thoughts, are outside the dominion of morality, the authority of God and the rule of the Bible. The wonder is, not that there is political corruption and business oppression, but that there is any piety or fear of the Lord left among us!

The other heresy, starting from the second meaning of the word Church, is equally mischievous. The organization for worship aims only at worship. Its sole and only aim is to lead men to worship God. In other words, it strives simply to save souls. Therefore it is taught that the only duty of the Church is to save souls, that politics, commerce, manufactures, legislation, are outside of her dominion; that if her members take any part in these matters, they do it simply as citizens and not at all as members of the Church. In other words, that because it is the duty of ecclesiastics to lead the worship of believers, therefore Christians should not seek to reform the abuses that exist.

This argument overlooks one fact. It is the duty of the Church in the larger sense, of all Christians, to save souls. The organization for worship is one, and only one, of the instruments it uses for this purpose. It uses many non-ecclesiastical instrumentalities, such as the family, the Y. M. C. A., the Y. W. C. A., the A. B. S., the A. T. S., the A. S. S. U., the religious papers, etc. It also should use civil and political instrumentalities—must use them to do its work in saving souls. The W. C. T. U. has done a vast good. Prohibition laws have saved many souls. The juvenile courts in Denver and Chicago have saved souls. Indeterminate jail sentences in New York State have saved souls. The abolition of the trusts and tariff reform will save souls. The limitation of child labor in coal mines and cotton mills will save souls.

This reform work we are to do as members of the Church in its larger sense, as Christians, as followers of Christ, as believers in the full inspiration of the Bible as an infallible rule of faith and practice. We cannot do it merely as citizens; we have tried and failed. We cannot do it merely as philanthropists, for outside of the influence of Christianity there is no philanthropy, and the weaker that influence is, the feebler is philanthropy. If, as agnostics, we try to reform the evils of our civilization we will make a 1794 France; if we do it as Mohammedans, we will produce a Morocco; if as heathen, a China; if as Romanists, a Venezuela. Christ came to fulfill the law and the prophets; and his followers will carry on his work.

The first of these two heresies is more prevalent in the north, and the second in the south. Which is worst, we will leave the reader to decide. Both lead practically to the same end, the separation of our business and politics from morality and the fear of God.

Morristown, Tenn.

Self is the only prison
That can ever bind the soul;
Love is the only angel
Who can bid the gates unroll;
And when he comes to call thee,
Arise and follow fast;
His way may lie through darkness,
But it leads to light at last.

—Henry van Dyke.